

The Social Power of Children's Literature

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Abstract:

It is a common opinion that the ideas children are exposed to when they are especially young will impact their views throughout life. All parts of culture, including movies, music, television, plays, and art, can act as influences. "Given the proliferation of media messages in today's world, it stands to reason that these messages may have the potential to shape what children know, think, and do. Research on the human brain suggests that powerful visual images grab our attention and stay in our memories, and these images are the mainstay of the media" (Jalongo). As an English major, I am interested in analyzing children's literature for cultural and social messages and themes in plots, character development, symbolism, and other literary techniques. In doing so, I will examine messages ingrained into young minds by the stories they read. Specifically, I would like to focus on the standards set for gender roles and gender performance (Judith Butler) by children's books. To do so, I will analyze examples of children's literature ranging from 1950 to present day. I will read three bestselling books from each decade. Using the techniques I have acquired studying literature, I will identify key literary methods for setting particular standards.

I want to examine this topic in order to help families and authors know the impacts of their words upon a child's social outlook and their view of themselves. Hopefully, the themes that are constraining can be recognized and filtered out of children's literature, and I will learn a great deal about how and why society in the United States has socially trained its children through literature.

The Books:

The following list of books is restricted to only those that I or my classmates read in elementary school.

Pre-1950: *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame (1908), *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911), *Stuart Little* by E.B. White (1945).

1950-1959: *The Secret of the Wooden Lady* (Nancy Drew) by Carolyn Keene (1950), *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis (1950), *The Secret of Wildcat Swamp* (Hardy Boys) by Franklin W. Dixon (1952).

1960-1969: *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell (1960), *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster (1961), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl (1964).

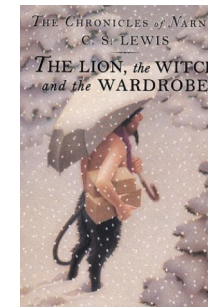
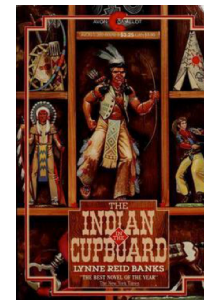
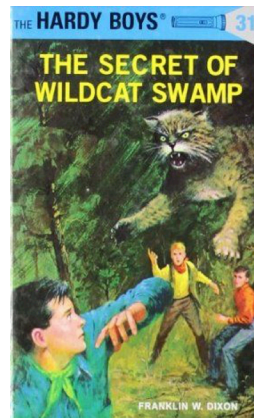
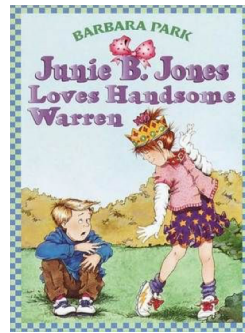
1970-1979: *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* by Robert C. O'Brien (1971), *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson (1977), *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume (1972).

1980-1989: *The Indian in the Cupboard* by Lynne Reid Banks (1980), *Matilda* by Roald Dahl (1988), *Bill's New Frock* by Anne Fine (1989).

1990-1999: *Magic Tree House: Dinosaurs Before Dark* by Mary Pope Osborne (1992), *Junie B. Jones Loves Handsome Warren* by Barbara Park (1996), *The Adventures of Captain Underpants* by Dav Pilkey (1997).

2000-2009: *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli (2000), *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan (2000), *The Castle Conundrum* (Hardy Boys) by Franklin W. Dixon (2001).

2010-2019: *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth* by David Kinney (2010), *Hold Fast* by Blue Balliett (2013), *Sisters* by Raina Telgemeier (2014).



Findings:

Note: this is a two-year research project. I was over halfway through the first year when campus closed due to the pandemic. The following are observations I have made while reading some of the books on my list. I have not made any conclusions, and I have another year and a half scheduled to finish this research.

The Secret of Wildcat Swamp (Hardy Boys) by Franklin W. Dixon (1952)

Just one woman has any dialogue in this entire book. That woman is referred to only as "Mrs. Bailey" or "my wife." Interviewed by the Hardy Boys, her accidental effort towards the case was housework. "'No, I washed every downstairs window today,' Mrs. Bailey asserted," (Dixon 19).

The Hardy Boys' mother is hardly even there. "When they reached home, their quiet, pretty mother said she would leave the decision to their father. After the situation was explained to him that evening, the tall, well-built detective..." (7). Their mother is also unnamed, and exists only in relation to her male family members. The women in this book, and lack of, demonstrate that females play no part in adventure or detective work. Instead, they are complimented for being "quiet" and in the background.

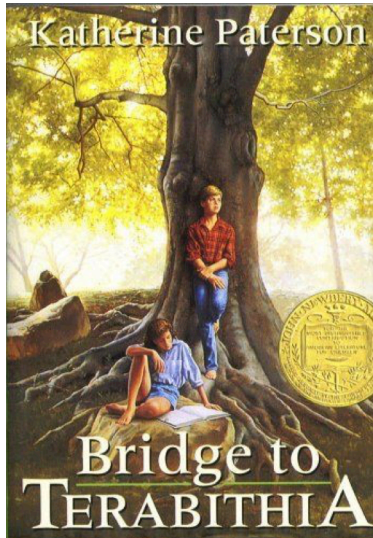
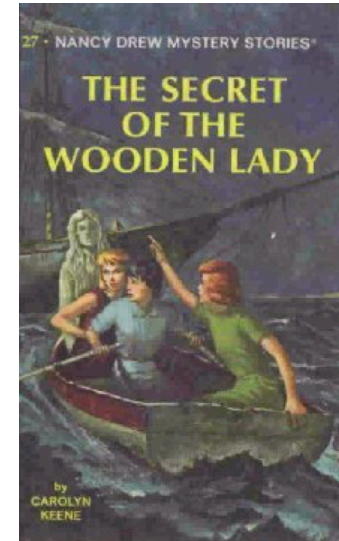
Also worth mentioning is that the author named the characters "The Hardy Boys." Hardy literally means strong, capable of enduring fatigue and hardship, which sets a standard for how "the boys" should act. At the beginning of the book, the Frank and Joe Hardy are demonstrating physicality by digging a hole for a pool. Their overweight friend Chet, also on the scene but not helping, is described as cowardly and weak, making him the foil to the ideal Hardy boys.

***The Secret of the Wooden Lady* (Nancy Drew) by Carolyn Keene (1950)**

Nancy Drew is raised by her father, and her mother is dead. Therefore, it can be assumed that Nancy is spunky and smart because of what her father taught her. This may speak to a man's greater ability to influence a daughter intellectually than a woman's.

Unlike the Hardy Boys, who are both around the age of fifteen, Nancy Drew is an adult at eighteen years old. The characters perform very similar detective work, which suggests that in order for women to be capable of what men are, they must grow up a bit, (they're three years behind men).

Nancy's cousins, Bess and George, are foils of each other based solely on gender performance. George and Bess are both women. George performs masculine while Bess performs feminine, with the narration pointing out things like their hair and clothes. George gives Bess a valuable ruby necklace because she sees no value in it for herself.



***Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson (1977)**

The main character, Jess, is a young boy living on a farm with his family. Jess spends all summer practicing running, so that he can be the fastest in the fourth grade. Jess also likes to draw, but hides that talent and hobby because he's afraid it seems girlish. He befriends new-girl Leslie after she beats all the boys in a footrace at school.

Jess narrates the recess environment, "The older boys always took the dry center of the upper field for their ball games, while the girls claimed the small top section for hopscotch and jump rope and hanging around talking" (Paterson 4). Clearly, the school is very divided among genders and what they can each do for fun.

The introduction of Leslie into this environment is important, because she *acts* like a boy, and therefore gains the respect of Jess. Even her appearance is androgynous, and causes Jess to question her gender. "Girl, he decided" (22). "Leslie always wore pants, even to school. Her hair was 'shorter than a boy's'" (58).

A class assignment tasks the students with writing compositions about their hobbies. "Jess had written about football, which he really hated, but he had enough brains to know that if he said drawing, everyone would laugh at him" (42). Leslie's composition about scuba diving is read by their teacher, who says, "it tells about an unusual hobby-for a girl" (42). The concept of scuba diving frightens Jess, and he narrates, "his dad expected him to be a man. And here he was letting some girl who wasn't even ten yet scare the liver out of him by just telling what it was like to sight-see underwater. Dumb, dumb, dumb" (43).

Leslie is a strong female character because she performs as a "boy" in Jess' eyes. This "tomboy" persona becomes very popular for female characters who are supposed to be viewed as strong.